

## Letter From England

by Derrick Turner

### The Necessity for Ancestor-Worship



"It is a noble faculty of our nature which enables us to connect our thoughts, sympathies and happiness with what is distant in place and time; and looking before and after, to hold communion at once with our ancestors and our posterity. There is a moral and philosophical respect for our ancestors, which elevates the character and improves the heart"—Daniel Webster.

Now that history is becoming "her-story," it becomes necessary that civilized people *actively* preserve that which would otherwise perish. A nation can survive only insofar as the *idea* of the nation survives; and this national idea is made up of many individual experiences and ideals, bound together by historical forces, and feeling themselves part of one related, corporate entity. It follows, therefore, that we should endeavor especially to retain our parochial, familial memories, because these constitute our national patrimony.

If we do not know about the history of our own families, we should attempt to find out about them. However unremarkable, or even ignoble, these histories may be when seen in isolation, they have become woven into the national being, like individual threads worked into a tapestry, and have taken on a vicarious, grander life of their own when viewed in the national context. Researching family history is not only fascinating in itself, but also gives a long-term perspective on those events of today which can otherwise overwhelm us.

There is something appealing about genealogy. To research your kin's history is to research the deepest recesses of your own character. It is the most *fundamental* of all hobbies. If your kin had not been who they were, you would not be who you are. As Hazlitt reminds us:

"Features alone do not run in the blood; vices and virtues, genius and folly, are transmitted through the same sure but unseen channel." An awareness of who your parents are or were, who their parents were and who your parents' parents were—and where they lived—helps you to connect, somehow, with history. All of a sudden, you become inextricably linked with those who have gone before, with those whose romances and marriages made you, by creating your parents' parents' parents.

Dusty parish ledgers come to life; dry records are hand-colored and reanimated; long-past, faintly fragrant summer evenings are relived, in some fragmentary way, at least; freeze-framed scenes from your familial history are filled again, momentarily, with passion. The faraway becomes the close-to; the coat-of-arms in the hallway is, suddenly, more than just a decoration. Precursors walked where the white horse is cut into the hill, and walked beneath the line of trees that bisects the deeply familiar horizon. A sense of pride, in your longevity if in nothing else, fills you—you realize the unique contribution that your clan has made to history—it may even be that you uncover some romantic historical or noble connection. Like a man with a metal-detector, you cannot be sure what the next step will unearth. Like him, when he handles some long-entombed Roman coin, you are intimately in touch with the past.

Genealogy compels you to realize both how unimportant and how important you are—unimportant in terms of history (one small organism among many, all of them with preoccupations and concerns every bit as real as yours), important insofar as a duty devolves upon you, *not to let the line die out*. Genealogy puts you in communion with your family's past, and in communion with your country's past. You are a link in a long chain, and the chain of your kin is one of many forming the pattern of your national history and informing your present national consciousness. There is an intrinsic satisfaction in being inescapably part of both a genetic family and a national family. There is a deep satisfaction in the idea of your being true to your forefathers, of being true to

type.

When travel writer H.V. Morton visited Lewes in Sussex in 1942, he stated the consanguinity of genealogy thus: "And through it all runs the connecting link of a local spirit: the feeling that sheep-lanes which became lanes and then grew into roads, still carry men to the old town on the hill, men who are not unlike their fathers or their grandfathers" (*I Saw Two Englands*, Methuen, 1942). Despite the dysfunctional atomization of the years since the war, despite the progressive disintegration of the family unit, despite the increased mobility of ideas and populations, a chord of harmony is struck by Morton's simple words, and we get a tantalizing whiff of a solidity and permanency that is becoming a memory (or is an unattainable dream).

Genealogy enables us to gather some of that protective shield around us, and to wrap ourselves in a feeling of order and rootage. Not all of us, not even many of us, I suspect, want to be rolling stones all our lives; genealogy reminds us that there was once at least a semblance of immutability. We have visions of Norman churches, full of dusty sunlight—of half-timbered houses—and overgrown graveyards—and remote farms—and the crowded streets of lost cities—and we see people similar to ourselves all the way through. Genealogy reminds us that nothing is futile, that no act is insignificant, that some acts—such as the admission of millions of immigrants from the Third World into Britain—are of the utmost significance. Will Alice Duer Miller's "blond, bowed," blue-eyed English faces *really* "always be / found in the cream of English places / Till England herself sink into the sea"?

Genealogy reminds us that we may *definitely* attain to some kind of immortality. In an age when many of us have lost our religion forever, that is some consolation. We share something of our features and traits with ancestors who may be very distant indeed; they have become immortal through their children, and we may through ours. Content in our deep roots, and in our assured future, we spread contentment around us; we realize with the now-obscure but not

dead Landon that: "The pride of blood is a most important and beneficial influence." In a world speedily becoming homogenized, it is vital that we retain some vestige of exclusivity, so that when seen in retrospect by some future Santayana, "Our distinction and glory, as well as our sorrow, will have lain in being something in particular, and in knowing what it is." The landscape is real and substantial, more than just a pretty picture. We own it, because our ancestors have fertilized it, and we become aware of the need for its preservation; our country is real, a long saga of discrete, diverse threads blending and yet retaining their distinctiveness; we are venerable, and valuable in our own right; and the whole world becomes clearer and more colorful all at once.

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## Letter From Moscow

*by Lawrence A. Uzzell*

### Reform From Within



Across Serpukhvskaia Street from my apartment is a vintage Soviet-style "Palace of Culture," its blank concrete walls topped by an immense neon sign. Ten years ago it offered lectures on class consciousness to factory workers; now it houses a discotheque, which plays American rock music until 6 A.M. Ten years ago an order from the district party committee would have served as a de facto antinoise ordinance. Now my neighbors and I just use earplugs. The Russian language does not have a word for "privacy," and the average Russian still does not expect to have much control over his environment. The country is still a place of ubiquitous loudspeakers, which are now available to people who call themselves "*biznesmeny*" but who actually have more in common with Beltway bandits or Tammany Hall. The inherently collectivist tendencies of rock music fit rather well into this setting: Russia has subjected me to as much compulsory rock-listening—on Aeroflot, in Metro stations, even at the exclusive Menatep Bank—as my college

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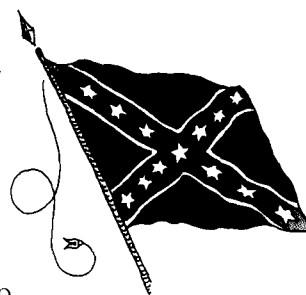
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